

SALTY CHRISTIANS
Matthew 5:13-16
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John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

It would be terribly presumptuous of us to conclude that God arranged the weather to illustrate the point of our New Testament Lesson this morning. The lectionary assigns the text, Matthew 5:13-16, to the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany: that is to say, today. "You are the salt of the earth - you are the light of the world." The weather has conspired to make us unusually sensitive to both. Cities throughout the Midwest have been forced to use much more salt on their icy streets and expressways than ordinarily would be the case. Shortages are imminent, and all of a sudden, this modest, inconspicuous element looms as a rather urgent necessity of life. And light: the story is much the same. It was necessary last week to conserve, and what an unusual and rather eerie experience it was to drive down Broad Street without the benefit of street lights. Jesus didn't anticipate a United Mine Workers strike when He suggested that a "city set on a hill cannot be hid." How ironical, I thought last week, to be studying this text, and then on Wednesday to have to order the Broad Street steeple lights turned off.

Salt - Light: two active phenomena, which have almost no identity, almost no function, until they are applied to something else. The essence of sodium chloride is almost academic until you put it on something, and then it does what it was created to do. The essential nature of light is of interest only to the physicist. What most of us care about is what it does for dark streets and corners and rooms.

The text is a popular and important one. The setting is the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus had taken His twelve new friends away from the crowd that was following them, up into a mountain, and there gave them a crash course in discipleship. It is important, I have always thought, that His words were not directed to the crowd. It was not a popular oration. Rather, out of the crowd, away from the crowd, He called the particular men who were to be His disciples, and set out to explain the new kingdom, the new life He was introducing.

We call His opening words, "Beatitudes". "Blessed are the poor, those who mourn, the meek, the hungry and thirsty, the merciful, pure, peacemakers, persecuted." I've always imagined that when the disciples heard that they must have concluded that Jesus' new way of life would be led in a monastery somewhere, or in one of those strange communities of religious fanatics around the Dead Sea. You could be poor, meek, pure behind the walls of a cloister and get away with it. But everyone knows that in this world a man must be tough and look out for number one, and that you get your neighbor before he gets you, or the nice guys notoriously finish last. Christian people, by the way, have been coming to that conclusion for the better part of two thousand years. The Christian ethic, when you come down to it, is just not very realistic. If you want to follow it - "get thee to a nunnery" - either literally, in which case only certain people are expected to be Christians, or figuratively, in which case you can be a Christian at certain times, and in certain places, but conduct the rest of your life on the basis of some other set of standards. And just as the disciples were coming to that conclusion Jesus slammed the door on it, totally, forever. "You are the salt of the earth - you are the light of the world."

Notice, also, that it is a statement of fact, and not an exhortation. He did not say, "Gentlemen, please, for my sake, try to act like the salt of the earth." He did not say, "You will feel infinitely better about yourselves, if you set out

to become the light of the world." Rather it appears, in His mind, to have been an accomplished fact. You ARE the salt of the earth: you ARE the light of the world. The only choices, apparently, were where to be salt - and how to avoid the bushel.

The function of light requires no exposition. Its task is to illumine, to shine, to reveal, to enable us to see the truth. Salt is a little more subtle and complex. It is significant that one of the highest compliments you can pay someone, two thousand years after Jesus turned the phrase, is to call him or her the salt of the earth.

Salt was a very valuable commodity in the First Century. A popular idiom of the day asserted that a bag of salt was worth a man's life. The Romans ruined the soil of Carthage during the Second Punic War by pouring salt on it. And extending thousands of years into the past salt was used liturgically in religious rituals. Sacrificial customs in the Temple, for instance, prescribed the use of salt, and the law itself required that new born babies be rubbed with salt.

The two qualities of salt which made it most valuable however, were its preservative power and its capacity to add flavor and zest to food. One was a necessity. In the hot climate of Palestine the preservation of food from spoiling was a daily requirement. Life was barely possible without it. The other was not a necessary per se, but an added luxury. Bland food just doesn't taste very good. If you have experienced a salt free diet you know the meaning of Job's lament: "Can that which is tasteless be eaten without salt?" Salt enlivens, and gives zest, and brings out the taste in food. And interestingly, the First Century believed that a dose of salt activated the appetite - a shock to those who have always wanted to believe that the teachings of Jesus are the antithesis of human appetite of any kind.

In any event, all of that is behind and around the words of Jesus: "You are the salt of the earth - you are the light of the world." He was describing them. But more to the point, He was describing how He chose to be known to the world. He is the salt of the earth - He is the light of the world. The job of disciples is to live out this commissioning in such a way that the essential nature of Jesus Christ will be seen and experienced by the world. To read the text is to fall under its spell. We who constitute the Christian Community two thousand years later, are salt of the earth and light of the world.

Our problem, however, is that we seem always far better at words than acts. Our creeds outdistance our deeds. Our religion is far more a matter of believing than being. Tolstol complained that Christians left him unmoved. He wrote, "only actions, proving their conception of life to have destroyed the fear of poverty, illness and death, so strong in myself, could have convinced me." (Interpreter's Bible, vol. 7, p. 190). Each generation of young people says the same thing: "show us the faith; let us see and experience the love about which you do so much talking." My experience is that when young people exercise their freedom by rejecting the institutional church, it is rarely for theological reasons. Ordinarily it is simply that they have not seen the Gospel of Jesus Christ being taken very seriously. The only heresy in youth culture I know of is phoniness: young people have a disturbing tendency to spot it a mile away. When Christian adults talk about love for humanity and then go right on discriminating against a portion of the human family young people have a distressing but marvelous way of understanding precisely what that means.

What does it mean to be the Church of Jesus Christ? What is our assignment, our reason for being? There are many models, and the institutional church spends an inordinate amount of time and energy discussing them. But the question remains: "What are we about?" I propose that we take the words of Jesus seriously. We are to be the salt of the earth - as a church; and individually, we are to be salty Christians.

We are to preserve - just as salt acts as a preservative against spoiling. Our nature as disciples of Jesus Christ is to protect that which is essential to human life. And I submit that when we go about identifying what that might be, the dignity and value of individual human life emerges as the highest priority. We will oppose, that is to say, anything which robs humanity of dignity and assaults in any way the value of individual human life.

Mass society does both inevitably, however unintentionally. Little people get lost in big structures. Taxpayers become numbers, flesh and blood people become cases, ethnic communities become voting blocs, and big cities are places where men and women feel lonely. Someone, it seems to me, with more than a little salt, has to stand with and for the individual. That is our job.

There are two major areas, however, which ought to be concerning us. Human dignity is most brutally assaulted, I believe, in the public realm, by pornography and by television violence. I am not personally comfortable with censorship, but I am concerned that Christian people become sensitive to the implications of the flood of pornography in the public media. Christianity is not opposed to, nor ashamed of human sexuality. In fact, our Old Testament is a rather lusty library - in which we learn that God's creation is fundamentally good. We are not opposed to portrayals of the human body. What should concern us is the systematic vulgarization and brutalization of the human spirit: the exploiting of human sexuality in order to make a profit - and that happens not only in overtly pornographic magazines, but every time a scantily clad actress is used to sell grass seed.

"Christianity affirms the absolute value of every living human being before God." That statement is from a Presbyterian position paper on television violence. The same paper reveals some disturbing data: one half of the characters on prime time television are involved in violence; ten per cent in killings. There are approximately sixteen violent scenes an hour in children's programs. There is a lot of research proceeding at the moment to determine the effects of television violence. Television, for better or for worse, is in the values business. And there is emerging evidence that television violence induces attitudes of passivity and insensitivity as well as fear. When a child watches people being hurt and killed hour after hour, the value of human life has been assaulted. Life becomes cheap, easy, people suffer and hurt and bleed with no repercussions, no felt pain, no accountability nor responsibility. Christians, I propose, ought to be taking that very seriously: turning their television sets off and then writing salty letters to commercial sponsors.

Salt is a preservative. It is also an agent of flavor and zest. Somewhere we concluded that Christian Faith is synonymous with long-faced piety. In popular literature the very word Presbyterian is used to imply stern, grim, joyless sobriety. Surely Jesus didn't mean that. Surely, when He used the "salt of the earth" metaphor He had in mind that His disciples would add a special flavor to life: that without the good news of His Gospel life has a way of becoming stale and flat.

We haven't always communicated that. The poet Swinburne wrote, "Thou hast conquered, O Pale Galilean; the world has grown gray from Thy breath." Ibsen has the Roman Emperor Julian say: "Have you looked at these Christians closely? Hollow-eyed, pale-cheeked, flat-breasted all; they brood their lives away, unspurred by ambition: the sun shines for them but they do not see it: the earth offers them its fullness, but they desire it not."

Oliver Wendell Holmes confessed: "I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers."

And Robert Louis Stevenson left an entry in his diary with which you may identify. He wrote in astonishment, "I have been to church today and am not depressed." (See William Barclay Daily Study Bible).

It is almost the inevitable tendency of religion to be life denying: to call people away from the worldly to the other worldly: to leave behind the world of appetite and pleasure and pain and laughter and joy for a somehow higher plane. The religion of Jesus was rooted in earth; in life. His religion heightened the human experience. He came for fullness of joy. And He wanted a salty group of friends to be His special people.

Robert Frost wrote about "no joy without salt:" no joy...
"That is not dashed with pain
And weariness and fault:
I crave the stain
Of tears, the aftermake
of almost too much love,
The sweet of bitter bark
And burning clove." (To Earthward).

The people of Jesus Christ will know how to live because they know how to love. They will add sparkle and zest to living: they will know that we were, indeed, created to enjoy and glorify God forever. They will be salt of the earth.

And light. Their very presence will point to the presence of God in the midst of life. They will make the secular sacred: they will be always pointing to the holy in the midst of the profane.

"You are the salt of the earth - you are the light of the world." There is something in that which implies a reversal of the way we usually think about our religion. We are accustomed to regarding religion as something we do for God. But in this statement it appears that Jesus is saying that the best religion is something He does through us, that faith begins with His grace. People of faith have always sensed the truth of that. "How absurd," Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "for the disciples to try to become the light of the world. They are already the light. The light is not an instrument he has put in their hands, such as their preaching. It is the disciples themselves." (The Cost of Discipleship, p.106).

So it is that at its best our religion is a way of life - a manner of living, planted in us and called out of us by God Himself. Our faithfulness is grace: God is the author. We are never more Christian, nor more human, than when we acknowledge that - and joyfully live it. We are called to active discipleship: not just to a life of waiting, sure of our eternal safety: we are called to serve Him and follow Him: to be what He has made us - salty Christians. For we - we here today - are the salt of this earth and the light of this world. Amen.